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To cite this article: Liv Helene Jensen, Hjørdis Frisnes, Cathrine Atundi Sødal, Marthe Lyngås Eklund & Beate Lie Sverre (18 May 2023): Nursing students' experiences as academic and linguistic mentors – Practical participation-based action research, Educational Action Research, DOI: [10.1080/09650792.2023.2204531](https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2023.2204531)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2023.2204531>



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Published online: 18 May 2023.



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Nursing students' experiences as academic and linguistic mentors – Practical participation-based action research

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ABSTRACT

Student mentoring is increasingly visible in professional practice, and in recent years, universities have integrated peer mentoring across different programs. To provide student mentors with appropriate support and contribute to the future development and success of student mentoring, it is necessary to investigate not only the benefits afforded to mentees but also student mentors' perceptions of their experiences. This small-scale action research study was conducted with participants who were recruited from the academic language mentoring program for second language students in a Bachelor of Nursing program in Norway. Multi-stage focus group interviews were used to explore participants' early experiences of being a mentor, mentorship activities, and the impact of mentoring on personal and professional development. The multi-step method is essential in practical action research because it creates both a space for reflection and dialogues on important themes and contributes to joint learning and formation of practical knowledge. Findings suggest that student mentors perceive their experiences as academic and linguistic mentors as highly relevant to their future professional role as nurses and their future role as mentors to colleagues and students.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 23 May 2022
Accepted 17 February 2023

KEYWORDS

Student mentor experiences; professional development; second language students; practical participation-based action research

Introduction

Student mentoring has been described using different learning paradigms. This article discusses how practical participation-based action research can provide a framework for increasing nursing student mentors' competence and at the same time improve the university's pedagogical offering and contribute to scientific, practical knowledge. This approach is characterized by intervening, collaborative, value-oriented, cyclical processes in which the quality of relationships, the learning and research process, and the sustainability of the results are significant factors (Coghlan 2019; McNiff 2010, 2014). The context of this study is the bachelor's program in nursing in Norway, which, like other higher education in Western countries, has increased the proportion of students of different ages and linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Linguistic and cultural diversity among students

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and academic staff (teachers) is a resource that can contribute to increased cross-cultural understanding and tolerance in higher education and in society in general. Some students are fluent in several languages. However, studying in a language other than one's mother tongue can be challenging. Research shows that second language students (L2 students) struggle with both oral and written assignments, interpretation of assigned texts and systematization of content in their own texts (Amaro, Abriam-Yago, and Yoder 2006; Crawford and Candlin 2013; Frisnes et al. 2020).

The Bachelor of Nursing program in Norway is based on the European directive on professional qualifications (European Parliament 2013/55/EU) and regulated by national guidelines for nursing education in higher education (2019). The 180-credit, three-year nursing degree qualifies students to take care of patients' basic needs, promote health, prevent and treat illness, provide nursing care to patients with complex health challenges and ensure a dignified death. Theoretical and clinical studies further contribute to the development of good communication and mentoring skills, service improvement competence, the reduction of adverse events and ensuring respect for human autonomy and co-determination. Nursing education is organized from the basic to the more complicated and complex. The first year includes basic nursing, anatomy, physiology, biochemistry, and self-management of work; the second year includes nursing for people with acute and long-term illnesses. The third year includes complex patient conditions, professional leadership, mentoring, and qualitative improvement of healthcare services (Regulations on national guidelines for nursing education 2019).

Nursing students are prepared to meet both academic and clinical requirements through the study of theory and through clinical placement, with guidance from nurses. Students often work in pairs or groups to support each other. Because nursing education emphasizes the development of competence in communication and interaction, nursing students must learn to communicate clearly and appropriately and interact with patients, relatives, and different health professionals (Regulations on national guidelines for nursing education 2019). L2 nursing students must learn three languages in parallel: the second language (in this case, Norwegian), academic concepts, and nursing and health terminology. This approach is also known as content and language integrated learning (Garone, Van de Craen, and Struyven 2020) and requires competence in both oral and written language and in language processes such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Klein 1988). Second language nursing students consequently face many challenges when learning in a foreign language.

The number of students with Norwegian as a second language in the bachelor's-level nursing program at the University of South-Eastern Norway has increased as the region has become more diverse. The academic staff noted that L2 students were often in danger of not passing clinical placement studies due to lack of Norwegian language skills and cultural understanding. L2 students often struggled to understand what was said in the lectures, and their written assignments and exams were often unclear and/or incomprehensible. These challenges called for new learning activities at the university that could strengthen professional and linguistic development among L2 nursing students. The L2 students wanted an informal place where they could speak Norwegian, meet students and teachers, and get help with difficult assignments. The academic staff and librarians, for their part, experienced that they lacked relevant supervisory competence in interactions with L2 students. Academic staff were also concerned that this could lead to L2

students dropping out of their studies or not completing on time. Lower study completion rates entail negative financial consequences for both students and the university. The recognition among the academic staff that there was a lack of appropriate learning activities for L2 students, as well as financial concerns at the institutional level, contributed to a strong desire for change.

Against this background and based on the recommendations we found in the research literature, a learning activity for L2 students called the Academic Language Café (ALC) was established at the Institute of Nursing and Health Sciences. Based on a desire for change, and the belief that participation is crucial to the learning process, the ALC was developed using a practical participation-based action research design in our own organization (Coghlan 2019; McNiff 2010, 2014). The present article highlights six student mentors' experiences of mentoring in the ALC and their professional development during participation in action research.

Theoretical frame

This section describes the theoretical framework for this study including research on peer mentoring programs for L2 students within the field of health sciences and concepts such as practical knowledge and experience, participation and action, and Vygotsky's socio-cultural learning theory, keeping in mind that learning occurs not only for mentees (those being supervised), but also mentors (supervisors). It culminates with the research questions this study sought to answer.

Peer mentoring programs for L2 students

Peer mentoring programs can be developed and structured in multiple ways. In its simplest form, peer mentoring facilitates the transition into higher education with mentors offering support, sharing their own experiences, and providing ongoing encouragement. More complex forms of peer mentorship may involve group-mentoring where a mentor provides revision sessions after a lecture, lab, or seminar. These sessions are used to reinforce learning content, build confidence, increase motivation, and develop self-efficacy (Abrahamson et al. 2019).

Previous research has emphasized the importance of the learning environment (Fuller 2013; Guhde 2003), and L2 students who feel that they are welcome and safe in the learning environment are more likely to participate in various learning activities (Mikkonen et al. 2016; Olson 2012; Sverre et al. 2022). It is therefore important for educational institutions to offer students individual support and invite them to get in touch when they need help. Small groups with a mix of majority-language students and students with other linguistic and cultural backgrounds, planned discussion circles, and dialogues with or individual guidance from more advanced student mentors have been found to be effective learning strategies for language and professional development (Fuller 2013; Olson 2012). Study groups with only L2 students have been shown to be less successful (Olson 2012). When these students need to clarify unfamiliar concepts, pronunciation of words or grammar, they need help from people with total mastery of the majority language.

Many of the recommendations for teaching students with other linguistic and cultural backgrounds, such as providing clear information and frequent feedback and creating a learning environment where students feel safe, applies to all teaching (Fuller 2013). However, this can be even more important for students who have experiences from other education systems. Students who are used to education that requires mostly memorization often find nursing education in the Nordic countries, the USA, and the UK very challenging because it requires active participation in group work, oral presentations, and discussions (Sanner and Wilson 2008; Billings 2015). To reduce the risk of discrimination and racism in nursing education, workshops and discussions where students with other linguistic and cultural backgrounds can share knowledge about their country's health systems, education, and family structures are recommended (Guhde 2003).

Some universities engage students at higher levels as mentors for students at lower levels as a complement to ordinary teaching. This form of student mentoring is characterized by help from peers who know the subject matter and can convey their own learning strategies (Vandal et al. 2018). Nursing student mentors in Norway have been engaged in scientific topics and assignment seminars (Jacobsen 2015; Meyer et al. 2019; Pettersen et al. 2021). At our university, third-year nursing students who have completed previous clinical and theoretical studies are invited to be mentors for L2 students in an academic language café. The student mentors work closely with academic staff (Frisnes et al. 2020). At this level, mastering complex nursing situations, nursing administration, and mentoring are highlighted in the bachelor's program in nursing.

Student mentors' learning experiences

Experience is a key aspect of practical knowledge; however, first-hand experiences have different origins. Some experiences are cognitive and occur through intellectual processes of thinking and understanding, some occur in feelings and emotions, and others happen through the body such as headaches or stomach pains (Coghlan 2019). Attending to experiences is the first step to practical knowing; the next is to search for understanding and ask questions like *What is going on here?* and *How do I improve my practice?* This opens the door for reflections and a turn to verification-oriented inquiry and judgments (Coghlan 2019; McNiff 2010).

Experiential learning is an engaged learning process whereby students *learn by doing* and by reflecting on their experiences. It makes learning an experience that provides learners with opportunities to acquire sound knowledge and to develop professional skills and dispositions that are necessary for securing employment after graduation. Many educational institutions are changing their educational approach, moving from traditional large lectures towards an emphasis on learner-centered pedagogies that actively engage students in social learning contexts (Abrahamson et al. 2019). In a sociocultural learning perspective, learning is understood as active participation in cyclical and iterative processes in the sense that it is repeated with improved results (Vygotsky 1978). A basic understanding of Vygotsky's notion of the *zone of proximal development* offers a possible approach to framing this gradually progressive guided participation. Learning is dialectical, and the learner interacts with other people and with the environment (Vygotsky 1978, 86). With the tenets of this dialogic framework, it is evident that a student can enhance the learning process by learning with, and from, a more experienced, capable

peer. While the nursing program sets the standards, mentoring allows students to participate more fully in the nursing program and to develop competence during clinical placements. Failure to adjust to social environmental issues and the experience of intellectual difficulties are significant barriers to progression within a higher education context. Successful learners must also develop their ability to overcome these barriers through self-regulation and meta-cognition (Abrahamson et al. 2019). In peer mentoring processes based on mutual respect and common values, both mentors and mentees are learning and caring (Glass and Walter 2000).

In the literature, supervision and guidance are often synonyms for mentorship. In this article we explore student mentors' learning experiences. We understand mentoring as both a professional and a personal process: professional because the focus is on the profession of nursing, personal because the processes is largely about the person's experiences. Learning through experiences is defined as a pedagogic and social process that involves both actions and reflections on action and recognizes that people build on previous learning by developing their existing knowledge and practice (McNiff 2010). Engaging in cycles of action and reflection involves trying to understand and make judgments about what is going on in a specific situation and decide what to say or do (Coghlan 2019).

Aim and research questions

This study aimed to explore student mentors' experiences and their professional development in the context of an academic language café and to create new knowledge by applying democratic methods that include the participants in the learning and research processes.

To address this aim, we asked the following research questions:

- (1) How do student mentors experience their personal and professional development as academic and linguistic mentors?
- (2) What challenges do student mentors encounter and how do they overcome these challenges?
- (3) How can practical participation-based action research in a group-based academic language café contribute to student mentors' professional development?

Methodology

Practical participation-based action research

A practical participation-based action research design was applied to explore the student mentors' experiences and professional development. The approach is interventionist, combines action and reflection, and aspires to create knowledge through collaborative processes (Coghlan and Brydon-Miller 2014) guided by learning relationships, critical inquiry (Boomer and McCormack 2010) and appreciative dialogues (Dewar and Sharp 2013). As the research process is carried out by the participants (in this case, student mentors in collaboration with teachers), the approach is also referred to as practitioner research (McNiff 2010).

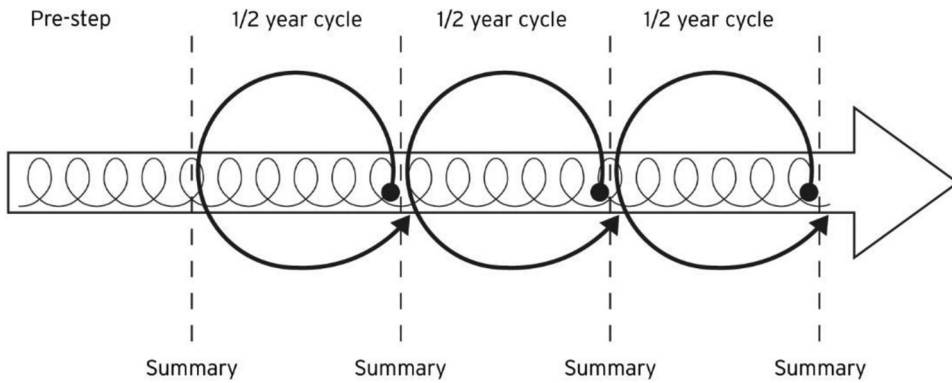


Figure 1. Cyclical learning and research processes.

This study focuses on student mentors' participation and collaboration in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of learning activities within the context of an academic language café. All participating students reflected on their own practice and were involved in the learning and research processes, sharing their own experiences. The discussion topics included how practical participation-based action research in a group-based academic language café can contribute to professional development in student mentors. This is a transformational process of growth and creative and critical engagement, where each step serves as a starting point for the next step (see Figure 1). The discussion includes critical thinking in relation to improving practice within the organization and why we chose multi-stage focus groups as our method within the frame of action research.

Cyclical learning and research processes

According to Lewin's definition, action research involves a pre-step and a spiral of steps, including planning, action and fact finding (Lewin 1973). The action research process in this study consists of a preparatory phase and parallel cyclical learning and research processes in a double spiral (Jensen 2009) with a special interest in the student mentors' experiences and professional development (See Figure 1).

The *pre-step* phase included a literature review and internal and external exchanges of experiences among academic staff and students, as well as recognition of the need for knowledge about nursing student mentors' professional development in an academic language café (ALC), which justified the study.

The *inner spiral* represents the core steps of planning, actions, and evaluations in ALC with mentors' preparation and planning (15 minutes), presentations and learning activities as dialogical processes (2 hours) and mentors' evaluation and reflection on the mentoring processes after each session (15 minutes).

The *outer spiral* illustrates the intervals between summaries with retrospective reflections on both individual and joint experiences with multi-stage focus interviews. It is this meta-reflexive process that differentiates practical participation-based action research in one's own organization from simple learning through experience in everyday life (Coghlan 2019). Meta-reflection and analysis can be described as

creative and abductive processes that involve going back and forth between individual events and important topics, reading previous research and theory, and reflecting.

Participants

Vacant student mentor positions for the ALC were announced to nursing students at the end of their second academic year. The requirements were having completed and passed theoretical and practical exams and having mastery of written and spoken Norwegian. In addition, prospective mentors completed a compulsory course in professional management and mentoring at the beginning of their third year. Nursing students who wanted to participate received an introduction to the action research processes (core steps, summaries, and multi-stage focus group interviews).

In the academic year 2019/2020, six students were engaged as student mentors in the academic language café. These six student mentors are referred to in this article as participants in the research process and constitute the sample of this study. All had completed the second year in the Bachelor of Nursing program. They had mastery of Norwegian (both oral and written), academic terms, and nursing and health terminology. Five participants were women, and one was a man. Five student mentors were second language students and one had Norwegian as their first language. ALC mentoring was voluntary and paid on an hourly basis.

In addition, six university lecturers/associate professors (hereafter: teachers), two university librarians and two volunteers with Norwegian/nursing professional competence attended the ALC on a rotating basis with one to two student mentors, one teacher, one librarian and volunteer per session. On average, eleven L2 students joined each ALC session during this academic year.

The academic staff in the ALC group acted as mentors alongside the student mentors as described in the core steps (below) and inspired the student mentors to take responsibility for the mentoring when they felt comfortable enough. Four teachers from the academic staff group in ALC moderated in the multi-stage focus group interviews. The six student mentors and four teachers collaborated in all stages, including the core steps, meta-reflections with multi-stage focus group interviews and creation of the written text that is the basis for this article.

The core steps of preparation, planning, dialogues, and evaluation in the ALC (inner spiral)

The core steps are cyclical and build on each other week by week.

Preparation and planning (15 minutes)

The mentors' preparation and planning before each ALC session drew attention to fundamental values and premises in action research, professional questions, and the practical division of labor. The focus was on the mentees' learning needs and how to stimulate academic language and speaking. The value of letting everyone's voice be heard and using open-ended questions, as well as of inviting the mentees to engage

in discussion and academic and linguistic reflection, were emphasized. Mentors were therefore encouraged to avoid giving answers and instead to facilitate reflective questions and dialogue. Continuity in the learning and research processes was ensured by alternating between student mentors and academic staff for process management (inner spiral). The student mentors were eager to get started. Some wanted to collaborate with a fellow student while others wanted to mentor together with someone from the academic staff.

Learning activities as dialogical processes (2 hours)

The ALC had an open structure, and no preregistration was required. At each session, one of the mentors invited the mentees to present themselves and define their learning needs. The purpose of the presentation round was both to get to know each individual and to include everyone in the community. At the same time, it gave the student mentees the opportunity to express their own learning needs.

Student mentors who had participated in the ALC over time expressed that the presentation round was a very useful learning tool: 'I have learned to introduce myself, say my name, what I am: nursing student in my third year of study. It has been very useful in all practice periods, in meetings with patients and staff.'

After the initial presentation round, the mentor, together with the participants, took responsibility for dividing participants into small groups according to the presented themes and learning needs. The student mentor encouraged mentees to elaborate on their learning needs in dialogic learning processes, asking open questions focusing on both academic issues or texts and professional and everyday language.

At the end of each session, the small groups gathered for a joint summary with reflection on their learning experiences by answering the question: What did you learn today? The student mentors encouraged the mentees to reflect and to use both academic and nursing concepts and everyday language.

During periods of intense exam pressure in the first year, several L2 student mentees expressed despair and a great degree of uncertainty and lack of faith in their mastery of the material. In the joint reflection, the student mentors often took the initiative to encourage the student mentees and recognize their knowledge, which they had demonstrated during the group discussions.

Evaluation and reflection (15 minutes)

The mentors had 15 minutes after the action for evaluation and reflection. During this time, attention was first and foremost focused on what worked well, inspired by appreciative dialogue (Dewar and Sharp 2013). With questions such as 'What did you achieve today?', special emphasis was placed on providing the student mentors with constructive feedback as they alternated with the academic staff in process management. An example of this is how they contributed to active participation by giving L2 students the time and opportunity to present their learning needs, reflect and use both academic concepts and everyday language. The student mentors often reflected on how they could ask more open and reflexive questions and how to find the answers together with mentees. The evaluations also involved critical reflection on challenges the student mentors and the staff had experienced. Some student mentors felt unprepared, including one who shared: 'I didn't know what was coming,

felt pressure to have the right answer.’ Some teachers, on the other hand, found it challenging to stay in the background and empower both the student mentors and the L2 students.

Meta-reflection with multi-stage interviews (outer spiral)

To explore the six student mentors’ experiences and professional development, we combined multi-stage focus group interviews and creative learning activities that were known for both the student mentors and the academic staff like sharing stories, noting keywords, and collaboration by using large sheets of paper and crayons to bring out meaningful experiences. In the analysis, we explored the student mentors’ experiences and critically reflected on their experiences (meta-reflection).

Multi-stage focus group interviews and analysis

The multi-stage focus group approach is characterized by the understanding that data can be created through conversations in a group around a topic and that new arguments can challenge previous consensus (Hummelvoll 2008). In this study three focus group interviews of two hours were carried out at three-month intervals (October, January, and June). The spaces in between gave the participants the opportunity to use their reflected experiences and strengthen their own mastery (See Figure 1, outer spiral).

The focus groups were led by a moderator (first author) who encouraged the student mentors to share their experiences. The group interviews were structured as dialogues and parallel preliminary analysis and took place in several steps, like a funnel, with introductory questions followed by more thematic questions and reflections (Halkier 2010). All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

The introductory questions in the first interview were: What is it like to be a student mentor in the ALC? What has worked well? Subsequently, attention was drawn to the student mentors’ experiences as mentors in the ALC. They were encouraged individually to write down key words on three post-it notes representing their most important or significant experiences as a student mentor. Examples of keywords were increased self-

Table 1. Examples of keywords and reflections.

Keyword	Personal reflections
Increased self-confidence	<i>I have led the ALC meetings, asked questions, and mentored the L2 students. I feel a little more confident. And I think it's because I had the opportunity to practice mentoring in the ALC, then I got a little better at it.</i>
Practical experience in mentoring that is relevant in the nursing role	<i>The fact that I have gained practical experience in mentoring, which is relevant in the nursing role. It is something that was unknown to me. It has been challenging. After all, you must impart knowledge to patients and relatives as clearly as possible and you must also be a mentor for other nursing students when you have completed your education. So, it is certainly something that has been important.</i>
Acceptance of inability to give an answer	<i>There have been few challenges. But I think for my own part, that putting the pressure on yourself that you should be able to do everything is a bit. . . letting go a little and acknowledging that I actually can't do everything. Because I'm unsure about myself, if I had to prepare and really have the answer to everything. So, for me it has to do with meeting people where they are, it's really just been nice.</i>

Table 2. Example of analysis from keywords to personal reflections to preliminary themes.

Keywords	Personal reflections (condensed)	Preliminary theme
Self-confidence Daring to express oneself Self-development and mastery	<i>An experience I have gained from the ALC is self-confidence. When I have chaired the meeting, asked questions, and guided the L2 students. I dare to talk. I dare to participate in large groups. Before, I could only sit and listen to what the others were saying. I feel that I have gotten something out of it, developed myself, become able to speak aloud in front of the others. That there is development of self-confidence and mastery.</i>	Personal development

confidence, helping other students, repetition of knowledge, ability to help other students, improved communication skills, practical experience in mentoring relevant to the nursing role, appreciation, security, and acceptance of inability to give an answer.

In the next step the student mentors presented their statements orally in turn linked to short stories and reflections (See Table 1). A co-moderator/teacher attached the written key words randomly to large sheets on the wall that were visible to all participants.

In the third step the key words and reflections were sorted by themes as a starting point for a joint discussion. The student mentors elaborated on the content of the various key words and preliminary themes and discussed them back and forth to establish an overall picture (See Table 2). To avoid one-sided exploration of what works well, the following questions were included in the discussion: What was challenging in the ALC? and What do you wish had been different?

The transcripts of the audio recordings with keywords, reflections and preliminary themes were sent to the participating student mentors and teachers before the third focus group interview to validate the content (See Table 2). In the fourth step the focus group looked for variations, commonalities, and possible new experiences. All student mentors actively participated together with the researchers to achieve communicative validity (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009).

The analysis was a step-by-step process, as described above, involving a back-and-forth between the whole and the parts of the data material inspired by Graneheim and Lundman's (2004) qualitative content analysis. The results of the analysis led to two themes that summarize the student mentors' descriptions of their most important experiences as mentors in the ALC: 1) development of communicative and mentoring competence, 2) professional and personal development.

Research ethics

Participation and democratic dialogues where all voices are heard are fundamental values in action research processes (Coghlan 2019). Important ethical questions are consequently how the participants are involved, who makes decisions and how, and whose interpretations should prevail and why (Eikeland 2006).

The student mentors' participation was voluntary; there were no requirements for how often the student mentors should participate. No one withdrew along the way. The student mentors organized their participation in the ALC themselves. The core activities with planning, actions and evaluations focused on both content and collaborative

relationships between student mentors and staff (See [Figure 1](#), core spiral). In the evaluations, the asymmetric power relationship between students and staff/teachers was emphasized so that the students' voices were heard.

The research questions and the step-by-step reflections were developed jointly by the student mentors and academic staff (See [Figure 1](#), outer spiral). The action research approach with core and outer spiral ensured active participation from all student mentors and academic employees. The internal research role provided access to local cultural codes of opinion and collaborative arenas, both formal and informal. However, it is important to raise questions of whether the internal role can 'go native', and what kind of engagement and distance is required to ensure validity (Eikeland 2006). As both student mentors and academic staff were mentors in the ALC, the core activities were familiar. The main challenges were exploring important experiences contributing to professional development and avoiding early consensus which can lead to a group expressing a common understanding and attitudes when there are divergent opinions (Hummelvoll 2008). Keywords were therefore explored several times and experiences were met with nuances and alternatives in several steps.

All personally identifiable information has been anonymized in accordance with the Personal Data Act (2018). The project has been assessed and recommended by the Norwegian Center for Research Data, NSD ref. no. 56922).

The student mentors' accounts of their experience have been translated from Norwegian into English and are quoted below. This is done to present students' experiences with the words, vocabulary and forms of expression that were used in the dialogues. The student mentors did not want to use codes or fictitious names that could point back to individual statements. The selection of quotes has been made jointly and represents important experiences. The student mentors did not express negative experiences but highlighted the challenges of being academic and linguistic mentors.

The nursing students' most important experiences as academic and linguistic mentors

The student mentors' experiences can be summarized in two main themes – development of communicative and mentoring competence and professional and personal development. The latter theme was influenced by the former.

Development of communicative and mentoring competence

The student mentors mentored in small groups and gradually took over as process leaders, whose role included welcoming participants, giving everyone the opportunity to introduce themselves and define their mentoring needs, dividing the participants into small groups by topic and facilitating a joint summary with sharing of learning experiences.

The student mentors encouraged the L2 students to use academic and professional terms and to specify what they thought was difficult to understand – for example, academic concepts such as human dignity, care, and empathy – and to ask for clarification

of key concepts in textbooks. The student mentors used facilitation methods such as asking open questions, drawing, reading aloud, and exploring words and concepts to clarify the meaning of academic material. One mentor gave an example:

There was one term [an L2 student] wondered about 'peristaltic movements.' She struggled to say the words out loud. I said that it's a very nice term to know because you'll encounter it in anatomy of the digestive system. Then I said: Could we write it on the board? And we spelled it out loud and she wrote it on the board, and we broke down the concept word by word.

The student mentors often recognized topics from previous coursework, work requirements and clinical situations. They shared their own learning experiences: for example, how they had divided large subject topics into smaller topics, made mind maps and worked in pairs on previous exam questions. One student mentor elaborated: 'I think it works well that we share experiences, not only our academic [knowledge], but also ways of studying that have been useful throughout our studies.'

Some student mentors found it challenging mentor others when they were not already familiar with the topic or issues. One student mentor described it as 'throwing yourself into the deep end'. The mentoring process in such cases often consisted of identifying what the L2 student was struggling to understand academically and linguistically by using open questions. One student mentor gave an example:

One L2 student was trying to understand the digestive system, but she did not know how to learn all these structures. I used an open question: How far have you come? Then she showed me a drawing. I confirmed: yes, I see you have drawn it, do you want us to go through one by one and just identify the function for each?

By using an open question and validating the L2 student's efforts at drawing as a learning strategy, the student mentor encouraged the L2 student to express her understanding of the digestive system as a structure consisting of organs. The student mentor in this example shows how she invites the L2 student to delimit the learning activity by looking at a drawing the L2 student has already made. In this way, she acknowledges the L2 student's work.

Professional and personal development

Having had the same syllabus and recognizing tasks in different subjects validated the student mentors' knowledge and gave them confidence in the mentoring situations. As one participant explained:

I think it was very useful that we went through the same curriculum . . . we sat down and went through the assignments in a very structured manner and then I suddenly felt - yes, I know a lot more than I thought. And it's a very nice feeling.

In the reflective dialogues, the student mentors and mentees learned from each other and developed an understanding of different cultural and linguistic codes. One student mentor clarified: 'I feel that I have shared my experience with fellow students and have received so much in return for it. It gave me such an aha experience and more understanding.'

The student mentors emphasized that they gained an increased awareness of their own knowledge as well as the confidence to assert it: 'I could do more than I thought.' They experienced personal development, such as increased self-confidence and the ability to lead and participate in professional dialogues. They emphasized that reflecting on their personal development was a useful experience for their clinical professional development. As one mentor said: 'The experience I have gained by being a mentor is self-confidence. When I come out in nursing practice, I am brave enough to talk and to participate in a large group.'

Having previously sat still and listened to others and been reluctant to talk and participate in discussions, the student mentors now experienced a greater sense of assurance in professional conversations. As one of them put it: 'I feel like I've evolved, just being able to speak aloud in front of people.'

The student mentors noticed that they became more attentive and were better able to detect and be aware of the mentee students' nonverbal communication. Some found this to be a surprising and unexpected experience, including one mentor who said: 'I thought it was very rewarding to help other students and see them develop. It was a good feeling. And that is perhaps the most unexpected thing.'

The student mentors all described the predictable structure of the ALC and reflections on their learning experiences as very useful for their personal development. They also expressed that the mentoring experience was important for their future professional role as nurses. One student said:

The fact that I have gained practical experience in mentoring is relevant in the nursing role. You must competently convey knowledge to patients and their relatives, and you must supervise other nursing students when you have finished your education.

Discussion

The student mentors described their most significant experiences as linguistic and academic mentors for L2 students and how they linked these experiences to their future professional role as nurses. Mastery experiences and challenges are discussed in relation to how practical participation-based action research in a group-based academic language café can contribute to student mentors' professional development.

Dialectic learning experiences

The student mentors emphasized the value of using their own linguistic and academic learning experiences when mentoring L2 students. This served as a resource when exploring words, concepts, and topics with which they were unfamiliar. Previous research confirms that student mentors are aware of the challenges of studying and often provide more concrete explanations than teachers and that they enjoy a high degree of trust from the students they mentor (Wong et al. 2016).

In this study, five out of six student mentors had experience as L2 students themselves. They were familiar with the linguistic requirements of nursing studies and could convey how they had succeeded in the learning activities of higher education. We are unaware of previous research describing how second language students' learning experiences can

strengthen linguistic and academic mentoring. However, it has been argued that student mentors should be majority-language students (Olson 2012). Our study indicates the opposite. The student mentors with previous experience as L2 students acknowledged the difficulties of academic and linguistic learning in higher education and were motivated to participate in dialectical reflection that enhanced their learning processes with both mentees and more experienced teachers. The goal of mentoring is increased mastery and competence. The main methods of mentoring investigated in this study are dialogue and reflection, whereby mentors and mentees reflect on language experiences and knowledge with a mutual recognition of each other's point of view. The mentor's responsibility is to help the person being mentored find or discover relevant knowledge and, in this way, develop their knowledge, what Vygotsky (1978) refers to as the zone of proximal development. The challenge for new student mentors may be not to provide answers, as in traditional teaching, but rather to lead a process of dialogue while withholding their own knowledge. This is an appreciative approach in which the mentor focuses on the mentee's strengths and resources and there is a mutual recognition of cooperation, well-being, and growth (Cooperrider, Whitney, and Stavros 2004). The cyclical and interactive processes of dialectical learning is supported by the theory of sociocultural learning (Vygotsky 1978). In this case, it involved sharing knowledge and learning from each other. The student mentors experienced improved communicative competence and cultural understanding.

Challenges and mastery experiences

The student mentors actively participated in both the preparations for and the reflections after the learning activities in the ALC and thus had the opportunity to reflect on their own development as mentors. They gradually took over both the small group mentoring and the process leader roles. A rotation system in which two out of six students attended each week as mentors made it possible for them to integrate mentoring into their own studies and provided multiple opportunities for them to develop as mentors and process leaders with support from their teachers and fellow students. In this way, the students' mentoring competence developed in both a regular and structured fashion. We believe this is an important prerequisite as reported challenges in student mentoring have been related to a lack of structure and planning (Demir et al. 2014), time constraints (Gilmour, Kopeikin, and Douche 2007; Loke and Chow 2007), and difficulties in adapting mentoring meetings during the study period (Demir et al. 2014). Mentoring in collaboration with teachers contributed to professional security. This is in line with previous research which emphasizes that student mentors in higher education should have the professional support of a teacher (Jacobsen 2015).

The student mentors experienced that their awareness of the L2 students' insecurities increased. They picked up on nonverbal communication and at the same time discovered that they could help both academically and linguistically in the mentoring situations. This was described as an unexpected and important mastery experience.

In their reflections, the student mentors applied theoretical knowledge about communication, placing special emphasis on the importance of dialogue and asking open-ended questions based on the L2 students' learning needs rather than providing answers. In this study, the student mentors experienced this as challenging, both academically and

linguistically. It was academically challenging not to be able to prepare, as in regular teaching. It was also challenging to ask engaging questions without taking over and to give appreciative feedback. Linguistic challenges were often solved jointly by writing concepts on a whiteboard and dividing text into smaller pieces to extract the meaning.

The student mentors experienced that they developed practical mentoring competence together with the L2 students, characterized by cooperation and mutual respect. Shared experiences contributed to a supportive, appreciative, and safe learning environment. Developing mentoring competence can therefore be understood as an ethical act. Being helpful to others, showing respect, and being up to date professionally are all values emphasized in the EU directive on nursing (2013/55/EU).

Preparation for a future nursing role

The student mentors reported increased confidence in dialogic learning and in performing the mentor and process leader functions. They realized that not everything can be planned in linguistic and professional mentoring. Thus, it requires an approach characterized by dialogue and based on knowledge, recognition, and humanistic values (Cooperrider, Whitney, and Stavros 2004). Experiencing that you do not know everything and do not feel completely safe is an important part of developing competence in nursing, where unforeseen situations can arise. The student mentors described their reflections on these experiences in terms of new personal knowledge of particular importance for their future nursing role, which will require them to meet patients and relatives in different situations. Practical mentoring competence is significant for nurses who have professional and ethical mentoring responsibilities in various situations (International Council of Nurses ICN 2021).

Practical participation-based action research – strengths and weaknesses

The practical participation-based action research used in this study can be illustrated as a double spiral, with the inner spiral representing core activities and the outer meta-reflections and analyzes (See Figure 1). The student mentors and teachers shared responsibility for the mentoring process in the ALC (See Figure 1, core spiral). The cycles of planning, learning activities and evaluations created an appreciative and safe learning environment where students could participate actively and explore their own learning experiences. The practical participation-based action research process is thus a learning process wherein the student mentors' experiences as tacit and conceptual knowledge is transformed into practical knowledge in their own practice. The enquiry never ends because each core spiral contains new beginnings (McNiff 2014).

To explore the student mentors' experiences in the ALC we choose multi-stage focus group interviews and step-by-step analysis. This approach makes it possible to focus on important experiences and explore divergent and critical opinions. Some action researchers are reluctant to refer to focus groups in insider action research. They claim that focus groups involve consultation without responsibility and suggest other terms that capture the interventionist nature (Coghlan 2019, 136). Some action researchers use the term workshops instead of focus group interviews to highlight the creative process. We believe that multi-stage focus group interviews meet this

criticism, and it is a strength that the student mentors actively participated as both mentors in the ALC and researchers in the meta-reflections. The multi-stage focus group interviews in this study were characterized by dialogue and the opportunity to apply new knowledge between each step. A source of error in focus group interviews, on the other hand, is premature consensus. In this study, the dominant view was challenged through multi-stage interviews and step-by-step analysis that explored both commonalities and variations of opinion. If a breadth of viewpoints is sought, the conventional focus group method should be used instead (Hummelvoll 2008). Multi-stage focus group interviews primarily aim at depth and at developing knowledge that is usable. The core learning activities in the ALC supported by co-mentors (core spiral) can be described as an individual discovery process in which the transcribed text opens new discoveries. The student mentors and teachers participated as a group in the development of the learning activities and as interpreters. When researching in groups, relationships are significant. Relationships are also fundamental to the framework of the university system, which is established through laws and guidelines. The role of practical knowledge in professional development has implications for systematic influence because practitioner-researchers can act as catalysts for changes and fruitful new developments (McNiff 2014).

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated how practical participation-based action research can provide a framework for promoting nursing student mentors' personal and professional development as academic and linguistic mentors. The process can be seen as a constructivist process in which the participants put their experiences into words and thus contribute to better understanding and professional development. Through active participation in the ALC, the students and staff provide important insights into both challenges and mastery in the process of mentoring L2 students. The nursing students in this study chose to be student mentors for the ALC. They reported increased self-confidence and discovered that mentoring does not mean being able to answer. The student mentors experienced this as useful both in terms of personal development and in relation to their future professional role as nurses.

The practical approach is flexible, reflective, and characterized by respect, appreciation, and commitment to fellow students. Multi-step focus group interviews are a variant of the traditional focus group method. They are well suited to practical action research because they help to create a space for reflection on central themes that the research deals with. The dialogic nature of the method contributes to co-learning and the formation of knowledge of importance for practitioners (in this case, student mentors) and working life (in this case, nursing). The method seems to have an activating effect on members' participation in the examination of experiences and knowledge which is partly unarticulated or implied, tacit knowledge.

The ALC was developed before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. During the pandemic, the ALC was held digitally. This did not work well, primarily because the appreciative and supportive interactions between mentors and L2 students were not recreated in this format. However, the ALC is now offered to L2 nursing students at several campuses, as well as L2 students in other bachelor programs. Although there is a need for

more research on student mentors' function and experiences in higher education, the ALC has led to institutional changes by drawing attention to L2 students' learning requirements and promoting better organization of learning activities, as well as more reflections and discussions about diversity in the university.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the nurses Amir Hussein Ali Khany, Kinga Włodarczyk, Katarzyna Cezesak, Nikoline Evensen, and Rose Umulisa for their active participation as mentors in the academic language café and their invaluable contributions in the focus groups.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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